

Page 2702

NOTE BY THE SECRETARIES

to the

JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

on

CLEARANCE OF THE FIRST BATTLE GROUP, 18TH INFANTRY, CONVOY
THROUGH THE SOVIET CHECKPOINTS AT NARIENBORN AND BABELSBURG (U)

The attached Summary, dated 29 August 1961, on the above subject, prepared by the Department of State and forwarded to the Director, Joint Staff, is circulated for information.

F. J. BLOUIN

M. J. INZELIDO

Joint Secretariat

JCS 1907/407

2702

JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
OFFICIAL FILE COPY
MAY 50 20004

1572 15100/13000 (21 Aug 61) 5

August 29, 1961

Clearance of the 1st Battle Group, 18th Infantry, Convoy
through the Soviet Checkpoints at Marienborn and Babelsberg

Summary

The following document is based upon a report from the Office of the Provost Marshall, Headquarters Fort on the clearing of the 1st Battle Group through the Soviet checkpoints on August 20, 1961. It describes the procedures which were used by the Soviets and particularly the delaying tactics which they devised to hold up the convoy as much as possible without, however, going to the extreme of actually interfering with the movement.

* * * * *

The first information on the movement of the Battle Group was given to the Soviets by the Berlin Command Provost Marshall about 2:00 p.m. on August 19 upon the receipt of instructions from Colonel Johns, its Commanding Officer, to advise the Soviets that the convoy of approximately 350 vehicles and 1600 personnel would arrive at the Marienborn checkpoint at 8:00 a.m. August 20 and would proceed directly to Berlin. As a result of a change in the original plans, Berlin Command informed the Soviets shortly after midnight, August 19-20, that the convoy would start to clear the Marienborn checkpoint at 6:30 a.m. August 20 and that it would be divided into six serials. The Soviets at the Babelsberg checkpoint were informed about the convoy at 6:00 a.m. on August 20 and it was learned that they were adding three officers and six enlisted men for the purpose of processing the convoy at that checkpoint.

Shortly before the arrival of the first serial at Marienborn a Soviet staff vehicle with the Soviet checkpoint commander at Marienborn and two officers showed up at the checkpoint there. The Soviet officers stated that they were prepared to clear the convoy, although they appeared to take a serious view of the matter.

When the first serial of the Battle Group arrived at the checkpoint at 6:30 a.m., the vehicles were lined up on the Autobahn beyond the last barrier. Then a Captain Belev, claiming that he could not count the men in the trucks, required all personnel to fall out and line up in front of the vehicles. He systematically wrote down the serial number and type of each vehicle and the number of personnel in each one. Upon completing his count he went back to the guard and up the number of personnel on an ancient abacus. Since he had a total of three more men than that given on the movement orders, the Soviet captain made a recount of the personnel and this time his figures agreed with those given by the US Forces. The first serial was then allowed to proceed at 7:45 a.m.

The second serial arrived at the checkpoint at 8:20 a.m. The Soviets went through the same routine and this time their count was two men short. Again a recount was made and the figures agreed with those given on the US movement orders. On this occasion the Soviet captain in charge was reported to have remarked that he had of course counted correctly the first time, and that two of the soldiers must have fallen asleep behind the baggage and failed to fall out. The second serial proceeded through the checkpoint at 10:00 a.m.

When the third serial was checked through, the Soviets counted the US personnel twice and each time their count was two men short. Since the US Commander of the serial was under orders to move through as rapidly as possible, he agreed to obtain corrected movement orders. These were prepared after some delay at the US checkpoint, and the third serial moved on at 11:15 a.m. At this juncture it was proposed to the Soviets that each US convoy commander prepare a list with the vehicle numbers before reaching the Soviet checkpoint, at which time the men would fall out in four columns instead of being strung out over a long distance. The Soviets accepted this procedure, the vehicle and personnel count was correct, and the fourth serial cleared their checkpoint at 12:05 p.m.

The fifth serial was cleared at 12:45 p.m., also without any difficulty. When the sixth and final serial was cleared, the US side made an error of two men in their count; corrected movement orders were obtained before the last convoy passed at 1:55 p.m.

At the Babelsberg checkpoint the Soviets acted with relative speed in clearing the first and second serials, the first going through in a little over an hour (completed at 12:38 p.m.) and the second in half an hour (completed at 1:45 p.m.) The Soviets then held up the third serial, claiming that the convoy had two men and one vehicle more than indicated on the US movement orders. Although it was explained to the Soviets that the two men had been picked up by the third serial due to a breakdown in one of the two previous ones, the Soviets used this as a pretext for detaining the convoy. The Soviet major finally released the serial after the US Provost Marshall relayed a message from USCIB Berlin that if the convoy were not released within fifteen minutes, the heaviest vehicle would be ordered to go through the barrier and proceed to Berlin without clearance. This warning apparently made an impression on the Soviet major who became nervous and released the third serial. Following this the fourth serial cleared the Soviet checkpoint at 7:13 p.m., the fifth at 7:49 p.m., and the sixth at 8:10 p.m.

During the processing of the convoys, the Soviets obviously had recourse to all kinds of delaying tactics, particularly those of taking different counts on personnel and of walking up and down the column and copying the vehicle numbers. While clearing the fifth serial, a Soviet Captain Pertsov climbed up on the tailgate of one of the vehicles in order to inspect the contents. The American MP on duty ordered him down immediately. The Soviet captain then threatened to turn the convoy back to a ramp where he could inspect the vehicles from that vantage point. Such an action would have created considerable confusion at the checkpoint and would have delayed the convoy indefinitely. When the Soviet major in charge was told that the US Provost Marshall would not permit Soviet officers to climb on the vehicles and that they would also not turn the convoy around, the Soviet at first insisted

upon this right, but finally gave orders to permit the serial to pass. When checking the last serial, Soviet personnel at Babelsberg continued to take their time about writing down the numbers of the vehicles although it was pointed out to them that these numbers had already been noted by the Soviets at Marienborn, and it was obviously a waste of time to write them down again. The Soviet rejoinder was that they were under orders to make their own lists. However, when it got dark, the counting and checking were discontinued in the middle of the column, and the convoy was released.

These actions would suggest that the Soviets were under orders to delay the entry of the American troops into Berlin as long as possible, probably in order to prevent their participation in the parade and reception by the population of the city. However, the Soviets were probably also under instructions not to go too far with such tactics since the Soviet major in charge gave way when the US side acted tough. All elements of the US convoy were cleared through the Marienborn checkpoint in seven hours and twenty-five minutes (from 6:30 a.m. to 1:55 p.m.); time elapsed at the Babelsberg checkpoint was nine hours and fifty minutes (from 11:20 a.m. to 9:10 p.m.).

It was also observed that the VOPO's were out in force on the Autobahn throughout the day of August 20. They were observed posted at all bridges, crossings, parking lots, and were running up and down in official vehicles on the other side of the Autobahn. A VOPO officer in a vehicle was also observed counting the US convoy and making notes. However, the VOPO's did not interfere in any way with the US convoy, and they moved the heavy civilian traffic at the Marienborn and Babelsberg checkpoints with more speed than usual